School of Humanities

U.P. Rajarshi Tandon Open University, Prayagraj

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I hereby declare that the short synopsis **"Digital Media and Gender Discourse: A Study of the Representation and Portrayal of Women's Issues on OTT Platforms in India"** being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in **Journalism and Mass Communication** under the **School of Humanities,** U.P. Rajarshi Tandon Open University, Prayagraj during the academic year **2023-2024.** It is a bona fide record of original work carried out under the supervision of **Dr. Satish Chandra Jaisal** and has not been submitted in full or part to any other university or institute for a degree or diploma. Further, it is certified that the short synopsis is plagiarism-free and the report has been submitted.

(ABHISHEK SINGH)
(Enrol. No.:2300402)

Research Supervisor & Co-Supervisor (If any)

(Dr. Satish Chandra Jaisal)
Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication

(Prof. Satyapal Tiwari)
(Director, School of Humanities)

19/07/24

(Prof. P. K. Pandey)
(Director, R&D Cell

Digital Media and Gender Discourse: A Study of the Representation and Portrayal of Women's Issues on OTT Platforms in India

SHORT SYNOPSIS

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Journalism and Mass Communication

to

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by

Abhishek Singh
Enroll. No. 2300402

Under the Supervision of

Dr. Satish Chandra Jaisal

Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication

School of Humanities
U.P. Rajarshi Tandon Open University
Shantipuram (Sector –F), Phaphamau, Prayagraj –211013

ABSTRACT:

This research investigates the representation and portrayal of women's issues on Indian Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms, within the broader framework of digital media and gender discourse. With the proliferation of web-based content in India, OTT platforms have emerged as influential spaces that shape and reflect societal perceptions. This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore how narratives in Hindi-language web series from 2018 to 2024 frame women's experiences and identities. Through content analysis, discourse analysis, and thematic interpretation, the research aims to uncover dominant themes, character portrayals, and narrative strategies that either reinforce or challenge traditional gender norms. The study further evaluates the societal implications of such portrayals, drawing attention to the role of digital media in shaping public consciousness and contributing to gender discourse in contemporary India. By critically engaging with content across diverse OTT platforms, the research seeks to offer nuanced insights into the evolving landscape of women's representation in digital narratives.

Keywords:

Digital Media, Gender Discourse, OTT Platforms, Women's Representation, Web Series, Media Portrayal, Content Analysis

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1. Introduction:

In the digital tapestry of contemporary India, Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms have emerged as a significant cultural force, redefining the entertainment landscape. The proliferation of digital media has not only transformed how content is consumed but also how it is created, particularly concerning the representation and portrayal of women. This study, titled "Digital Media and Gender Discourse: A Study of the Representation and Portrayal of Women's Issues on OTT Platforms in India," seeks to explore the intricate relationship between digital media and the depiction of women's issues in India.

Since their inception, OTT platforms have disrupted traditional media paradigms, offering an alternative space where narratives can be more diverse and inclusive. The accessibility and reach of digital media have allowed for a broader spectrum of stories to be told, many of which place women at the centre of their narratives. This shift is significant in a society where mainstream cinema has often been critiqued for its one-dimensional portrayal of women. Historically, Indian cinema has often depicted women in stereotypical roles, confined to archetypes that reflect traditional societal norms.

The rapid growth of OTT platforms in India, with millions of subscribers and a significant portion of content dedicated to women-centric narratives, presents a unique opportunity to study this transformation. According to recent statistics, the Indian OTT market is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 21.8% between 2021 and 2026, making it one of the fastest-growing segments of digital media consumption.

This research will delve into the nuanced ways in which women's issues are represented and portrayed on these platforms, examining whether OTT content has contributed to a more equitable and realistic depiction of women in Indian society. It will investigate the themes, narratives, and character arcs that are unique to digital media, and how they resonate with the audience, potentially influencing societal perceptions and gender discourse. By identifying specific gaps in existing literature, this study aims to provide a more detailed understanding of the impact of digital media on gender narratives.

The ever-changing landscape of digital media demands a closer look at how it shapes public conversations about gender. This research aims to deliver a thorough analysis of how women's issues are currently represented and portrayed on Indian OTT platforms. By employing qualitative research methods exclusively, the study will delve into the breadth and depth of these portrayals. The focus will be on examining how women's issues are framed within the narratives and their potential significance within the larger context of Indian media and society. This in-depth qualitative approach will provide a richer understanding of the representation of women's issues on OTT platforms, offering valuable insights beyond simply measuring audience impact.

2. Literature Review:

The literature review for the study "Digital Media and Gender Discourse: A Study of the Representation and Portrayal of Women's Issues on OTT Platforms in India" encompasses a diverse range of sources that collectively provide a comprehensive understanding of the current state of digital media, gender representation, and the specific nuances of the Indian context.

Digital Media Evolution: A significant body of work charts the evolution of digital media. Scholars like **Jenkins (2006)** and **Castells (2009)** have examined the rise of participatory culture and the network society, providing insight into the digital landscape's transformation and its implications for media consumption. Jenkins (2006) discusses the concept of "convergence culture," where old and new media intersect, creating new opportunities for content creation and consumption. Castells (2009) elaborates on the network society, emphasising the role of digital networks in reshaping communication and cultural practices.

Gender Representation in Media: Seminal works by theorists such as **Van Zoonen (1994)** and **Butler (1990)** offer critical perspectives on the representation of gender in media. Van Zoonen (1994) explores the relationship between media and gender, highlighting how media perpetuates gender norms. Butler (1990) introduces the concept of gender performativity, suggesting that gender is constructed through repeated performances in various cultural contexts. More recent studies by **Gill (2007)** and **McRobbie (2009)** focus on the portrayal of women in digital spaces, highlighting both progress and persistent stereotypes. Gill (2007) examines the "post-feminist" media culture, where traditional and progressive portrayals of women coexist. McRobbie (2009)

discusses the "aftermath of feminism," critiquing media representations that undermine feminist gains.

Representation vs. Portrayal: Representation refers to the presence and visibility of women in media, while portrayal focuses on the manner in which these women and their issues are depicted. **Hall (1997)** and **Hooks (1992)** provide frameworks for analysing both aspects, helping to distinguish between mere inclusion and meaningful depiction. Hall (1997) discusses the role of media in encoding and decoding messages, influencing how audiences perceive representations. Hooks (1992) emphasizes the importance of intersectionality in media portrayals, considering race, class, and gender.

Indian OTT Platforms: Research specific to Indian OTT platforms is emerging, with scholars like **Sundar (2019)** and **Kishore (2020)** analyzing their growth and the content they offer. Sundar (2019) discusses the rapid expansion of OTT platforms in India and their impact on traditional media consumption patterns. Kishore (2020) explores how these platforms cater to diverse audiences by providing a wide range of content. These studies often highlight the platforms' role in democratizing content and providing a space for diverse narratives. They also examine the unique cultural and social adaptations of OTT platforms in the Indian context, noting how these platforms reflect and influence Indian society.

Women's Issues in Indian Media: The portrayal of women's issues in Indian media has been the subject of scrutiny, with studies by **Sood (2011)** and **Desai (2014)** critiquing the often-problematic representation in traditional Bollywood cinema. Sood (2011) analyses the stereotypical roles assigned to women in Bollywood films, emphasising the need for more complex characters. Desai (2014) discusses the impact of Bollywood on societal perceptions of gender roles. In contrast, newer research points to OTT platforms as sites for more nuanced and empowering narratives. **Mehta (2018)** highlights how OTT platforms offer a departure from Bollywood's traditional gender norms, showcasing stories that center on women's experiences and challenges.

Societal Impact of Media: The broader societal impact of media representations is well-documented, with scholars like **Couldry (2012)** and **Banaji (2015)** discussing media's role in shaping public opinion and social norms. Couldry (2012) explores the concept of media rituals and

their influence on collective identity. Banaji (2015) examines the interplay between media consumption and social change in India. This body of literature provides a backdrop for understanding the potential impact of OTT content on societal views of gender. The studies highlight how media can both reflect and influence societal attitudes, making the analysis of OTT platforms particularly relevant.

Intersectionality in Media Representation: Crenshaw (1989) introduced the concept of intersectionality, which examines how different aspects of identity, such as race, class, and gender, intersect and impact individuals' experiences. Applying intersectionality to media studies, scholars like **Collins (2000)** and **Dines (2010)** emphasise the need for media portrayals to consider the multifaceted nature of identity. This perspective is crucial for analysing OTT content that seeks to represent women from diverse backgrounds and experiences.

Current Research Gaps: The literature review reveals a gap in comprehensive studies that specifically address the representation and portrayal of women's issues on Indian OTT platforms and their societal impact. While there is considerable research on digital media evolution, gender representation, and Indian OTT platforms individually, there is a lack of integrated studies that combine these elements to examine their interplay and collective impact on gender discourse.

3. Description of the Broad Area:

The intersection of digital media and gender studies represents a critical and rapidly evolving area of academic inquiry in the contemporary Indian context. As India witnesses an unprecedented expansion of digital technologies, the emergence of Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms has significantly transformed the media and communication landscape. These platforms, which bypass traditional broadcasting mechanisms, offer content directly to viewers via the internet and have gained considerable popularity for their accessibility, diversity of content, and flexibility of consumption. Within this digital ecosystem, the representation and portrayal of women's issues have become increasingly prominent, raising important questions about the nature of gender discourse being constructed and disseminated through these media forms.

Historically, mainstream Indian cinema and television have been critiqued for their stereotypical and often reductive portrayals of women. Female characters were largely confined to roles defined

by patriarchy—those of mothers, wives, or objects of desire—rarely afforded agency or narrative centrality. However, with the advent of digital media and the rise of web-based content, particularly web series, a discernible shift has begun to emerge. OTT platforms offer relatively greater creative freedom and have enabled content creators to explore nuanced, diverse, and often subversive representations of women. These platforms have become spaces for experimental storytelling that can challenge entrenched societal norms and offer alternative perspectives on gender roles and identities.

The broad area of this research engages with **gender discourse within digital media**—specifically, the ways in which women's issues are framed, narrated, and visualised in Indian OTT content. This includes an analysis of how these issues intersect with broader themes such as empowerment, resistance, social justice, and identity politics. Web series, as a specific content format, provide rich material for analysis due to their episodic structure, character development, and thematic depth. Through these narratives, complex representations of women are emerging—ranging from portrayals of professional ambition and personal agency to depictions of marginalisation and systemic violence.

This area of study is also informed by interdisciplinary perspectives, drawing from media studies, feminist theory, cultural studies, and sociology. The theoretical foundation includes key contributions from scholars such as S. Agarwal, Sarala Gopalan, P. Ojha, Judith Butler, Stuart Hall, Bell Hooks, and Rosalind Gill, whose works provide critical tools for analysing media texts and understanding the socio-cultural implications of representation. Concepts such as gender performativity, media encoding/decoding, intersectionality, and postfeminist media culture are particularly relevant to the proposed study.

Furthermore, the research engages with the broader societal impact of media representations, recognising that digital media not only reflects but also shapes public perceptions and discourses. In a society as diverse and stratified as India, the representation of women on such widely consumed platforms carries substantial implications for cultural narratives, social expectations, and even policy discourse related to gender equality. The growing popularity of Hindi-language web series among urban and semi-urban youth makes this form of media a critical site for examining how gender identities are negotiated in contemporary India.

By focusing on this broad area, the research aims to critically assess the extent to which OTT

content contributes to a transformative gender discourse, or conversely, whether it perpetuates traditional gender stereotypes in new forms. It will also evaluate the role of genre, language, platform policies, and audience reception in shaping the portrayal of women's issues. Ultimately, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how digital narratives influence, challenge, or reinforce prevailing gender norms in Indian society, making it a timely and significant contribution to academic scholarship in media and gender studies.

4. Objectives of the Study:

"Digital Media and Gender Discourse: A Study of the Representation and Portrayal of Women's Issues on OTT Platforms in India" aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To identify and categorise the prevalent women's issues depicted on Indian OTT platforms.
2. To analyse the framing and representation of women's issues within the narratives of Indian OTT platforms.
3. To explore the dominant themes and recurring patterns in the portrayal of women's issues on Indian OTT platforms.
4. To examine the use of discourse in the portrayal of women's issues on Indian OTT platforms.

5. Research Methodology:

The study titled "Digital Media and Gender Discourse: A Study of the Representation and Portrayal of Women's Issues on OTT Platforms in India" will employ a 'Qualitative Research Approach'.

5.1 Research Method: The study will be based on the Qualitative Research Method, under which the following types of analysis will be used:

1. **Content Analysis**: To identify and examine the key women's issues represented on Indian OTT platforms.
2. **Discourse Analysis**: To understand the nature and context of portrayals of women's issues on Indian OTT platforms.

3. **Thematic Analysis**: To identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) within the data.

5.2 Nature, Approach of Research, and Procedures:

Nature of Research:

- **Qualitative:** The study focuses on understanding the representation and portrayal of women's issues on Indian OTT platforms through in-depth analysis of selected web series.
- **Exploratory and Descriptive:** It seeks to explore and describe the themes and narratives associated with women's issues in digital media content.

Approach of Research:

- **Interdisciplinary:** Combining insights from media studies, gender studies, and cultural studies.
- **Social Constructionist:** Understanding gender as a social construct influenced by cultural and societal norms.

Research Procedures

This research will employ a multi-pronged qualitative approach to achieve its objectives. The following procedures will be undertaken:

Content Analysis:

To systematically code and categorise the content related to women's issues on Indian OTT platforms.

- **Coding Scheme Development:** A coding scheme with clear definitions and categories will be developed to identify and classify the portrayal of women's issues in the selected web series. Categories may include specific issues (e.g., workplace discrimination, access to education, etc.), character types (e.g., victims, activists, etc.), and narrative frames (e.g., empowerment narratives, social challenges, etc.).

- **Coding Process:** The content of the web series will be systematically coded using the developed scheme. This process may involve manual coding or software like NVivo or ATLAS.ti to ensure consistency and reliability.

Discourse Analysis:

To understand the nature and context of portrayals of women's issues on Indian OTT platforms.

- **Focus on Power Dynamics:** The analysis will examine how power dynamics are represented in the web series. This involves studying dialogue, narration, visuals, and how these elements portray women's issues and their roles.
- **Representation and Positioning:** The analysis will look at how women's issues are constructed within the narratives and how women are positioned in relation to these issues, shedding light on underlying ideologies and societal norms.

Thematic Analysis:

To identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) within the data related to women's issues on Indian OTT platforms.

- **Data Transcription:** All relevant data from web series content and potentially from interviews with content creators, industry experts, and scholars will be transcribed to facilitate thematic analysis.

Ethical Considerations:

To ensure ethical standards are maintained throughout the research process.

- **Informed Consent:** Obtain informed consent from all participants involved in interviews or other forms of data collection.
- **Data Handling:** Securely store and manage all collected data, ensuring it is used solely for the purposes of this research.

5.3 Variables Under Study

1. **Type of OTT Platform**: Different platforms like **Netflix, Disney+ Hotstar, Amazon Prime Video, Jio Cinema, Zee5, SonyLIV, Voot, TVF, MX Player** and **ALTBalaji** will likely have varying approaches to content creation and portrayal of women's issues.
2. **Genre of Content**: The genre of content (Action, Drama, Comedy, Thriller, Historical, Biopic) will focus on how these genres can influence the depiction of women's issues.
3. **Types of Women's Issues:** This category will focus on the specific women's issues depicted in the web series (e.g., workplace discrimination, domestic violence, access to education, etc.).
4. **Character Portrayals:** This category will examine how women characters are portrayed within the narratives. This could involve looking at their agency, vulnerability, social status, and the challenges they face.
5. **Narrative Frames:** The narrative frames will be analysed to determine how stories about women's issues are told. The study will assess whether these narratives are of empowerment, resilience, or if they reinforce traditional gender roles.
6. **Language and Power Dynamics:** This category will be used in your discourse analysis to examine how language is used to represent women's issues and how power dynamics are constructed in the narratives.
7. **Social Context:** This category will consider the broader social context reflected in the web series. This could involve examining how cultural norms, societal expectations, and media representations influence the portrayal of women's issues.

5.4 Sample and Sampling Technique:

Sample:

- **Sample Selection Process:** A diverse range of Indian OTT platforms, including Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Jio Cinema, Disney+Hotstar, Zee5, SonyLIV, Voot, TVF, MX Player, and ALTBalaji, will be initially considered for this study. To ensure the chosen content directly addresses the research questions on the portrayal of women's issues, I will conduct a preliminary content analysis across these platforms. Based on this analysis, the

final selection will be refined to 3-5 highly-rated web series encompassing various genres. This two-step approach ensures a balance between "Platform Diversity" and "Content Relevance".

- **Participant Sample:** A mix of audience members, content creators, scholars and industry experts will be included in the sample. Additionally, scholars specialising in gender studies and media analysis will be involved.

Sampling Technique:

1. **Stratified Sampling:**

- The content will be divided into strata based on genre and OTT platform.
- From each OTT platform, the top 3 to 5 rated web series will be selected to ensure a representative sample of popular and influential content.

2. **Purposive Sampling:**

- Individuals with a deep understanding of the OTT industry, gender discourse, and media representation will be purposefully selected. This group will include prominent content creators, directors, writers, and scholars for interviews.

3. **Snowball Sampling:**

- The networks of initial participants will be utilised to identify other potential interviewees. This technique will be particularly useful for reaching additional industry experts and scholars.

5.5 Tools of Data Collection:

In the proposed study, a variety of standardised data collection tools will be utilised to ensure the reliability and validity of the collected data. Following data collection tools will be used for the study.

Semi-Structured Interview:

- The semi-structured interview will aim to gather specific information related to the research objectives

Content Analysis Tools:

- Utilisation of standardised codebooks
- Implementation of thematic analysis frameworks

Additionally, if there arises a need for supplementary data collection tools, the study will employ self-structured data collection tools. These tools will be specifically designed by the researcher to address any gaps or specific needs that are not covered by standardised tools, ensuring comprehensive data collection.

Qualitative Research Tools

- **Content Analysis Software**: Tools such as **NVivo** or **ATLAS.ti** will be used to assist in coding and analysing qualitative data from OTT content.
- **Discourse Analysis Tools**: Software that supports the analysis of language, narratives, and communication patterns within the media content will be utilised.

6. Expected Outcome of the Research:

The proposed research aims to produce a nuanced and critical understanding of how women's issues are represented and portrayed in Indian web series available on OTT platforms. One of the primary expected outcomes is the identification of dominant themes, narrative structures, and character archetypes that reflect women's experiences in contemporary India. By applying qualitative methodologies such as content analysis, discourse analysis, and thematic analysis, the study will uncover the patterns through which gender roles are constructed, reinforced, or challenged in digital media narratives.

The research is expected to provide a detailed categorisation of women-centric issues depicted in web series—such as domestic violence, workplace inequality, mental health, sexual identity, and political participation. It will also highlight the degree of depth and sensitivity with which these issues are portrayed. This will help determine whether OTT platforms are fostering progressive

gender discourse or whether they merely replicate conventional portrayals under the guise of modern storytelling.

Another significant outcome of this research will be the evaluation of the **intersectionality** of gender with class, caste, religion, and region within these narratives. It is anticipated that the study will reveal how certain identities are either centralised or marginalised, thus contributing to a broader understanding of inclusivity and diversity in media representation.

The study is also likely to yield insights into the impact of genre (e.g., drama, thriller, comedy) and platform policies on the framing of women's issues. By analysing content across multiple platforms, it will identify whether certain OTT services are more inclined toward socially conscious storytelling, and whether such content is shaped by audience preferences, commercial interests, or ideological standpoints.

A critical contribution of the research will be its reflection on how these portrayals influence **societal perceptions** of women's roles and rights. It is expected that the findings will underline the potential of digital content to shape public opinion, challenge patriarchal norms, and contribute to gender sensitisation among viewers.

Additionally, the research will offer practical recommendations for content creators, media professionals, and policymakers regarding more balanced and responsible representation of women in digital narratives. These insights may further serve as a resource for academic curricula in media studies, gender studies, and cultural communication.

In sum, the research will enrich scholarly discourse on gender and media in the digital age, offer empirical data for future research, and promote a more reflective, inclusive, and socially aware media environment in India.

Abhishek Singh

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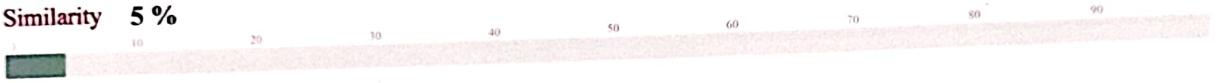

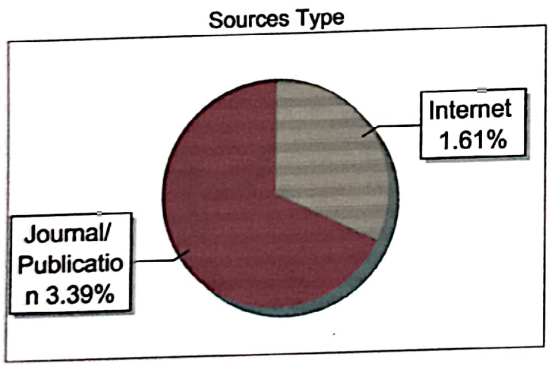

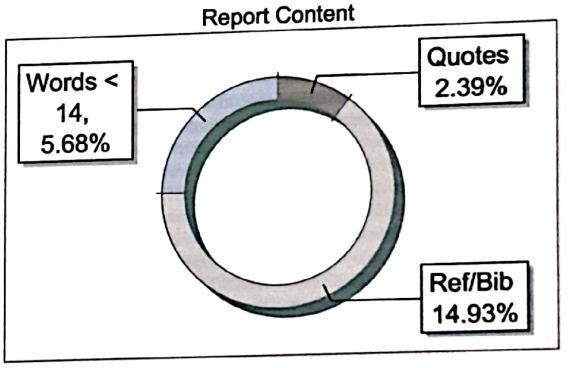

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